

## American Muslim Achievement Award (Islamic Center of Southern California) April 17, 2010

MCB: Thank you for the extraordinarily warm reception. I had not seen the video until tonight, it looked quite impressive, even to me. My wife wanted to come and I told her she didn't have to but now that I see think, I think I should have made her come. It would have earned me maybe a couple of brownie points when we have our arguments at home. But I'm particularly honored to join so many distinguished honorees whose CVs appeared before you and whose names appear on the program and particularly my dear friend, and I can say old friend, Dr., because were both beyond the age of seventy I think its authorized to refer to each other as old I think. Alright. But it occurred to me, especially hearing Maher speaking and looking at the list of honorees that in reality when a community honors some of its members, what it also does is, it honors itself. Because the ability to recognize others and honor others, is an expression of who you are as a community as well. And if you are able to recognize certain qualities and certain values in others, in means that these qualities and values are also yours. And so in honoring me and others, you also do honor yourselves.

At different times while we were talking about tonight's event, there were different topics that were raised and, in my mind, I had different ideas that I wanted to share with you. And so forgive me if I do not address any of the topics that I agreed to address with the organizers and just share some thoughts with you. And I think that the sharing of these thoughts will combine, at least I hope, the marriage of what is probably the farthest two points that exist in a human being; that is the distance between the brain and the heart. And so, I would like to speak with you not only from the mind but also from the heart and try to combine the two together. Somehow, I would like to start with a story and throughout the evening I will just tell you a few stories and try to link those stories together. Um, I have been appointed by the Secretary-General of UN, to serve as chairman of a commission to investigate war crimes in the former Yugoslavia. This was 1992. For those of you who are lawyers you may recognize the fact, that we had great moments in the world after World War Two with the establishment of the Nuremberg and Tokyo Tribunals and with the prosecution of those who has committed major crimes in connection with World War Two. And in particular, the world was shocked with the discovery of the Jewish Holocaust. It was really the first time in history that we witnessed the fact that an entire race could be eliminated, because it is a race or an ethnicity or a religion. And the horrible way in which thus occurred, awakened, I think in the minds of the world

community, a feeling that may not have existed beforehand. And the feeling is one that is particularly innate in the teachings of Islam. But not necessarily any different than the teachings of Judaism and Christianity and other religions and philosophy. And it's basically very simple, there is one God and the one God has created the humankind and that one God communicates to that humankind by a succession of prophets. And even though the message somehow seems to be somewhat different, in reality the substance of the message is not different and it cannot be different. And so you have, sort of a trinity, a trinity of God, of humankind and of religion in the sense of the message that God has communicated from Abraham to Mohammad.

This sense of this trinity, of this relationship between God and humankind is also very telling in terms of the intrinsic relationship between human beings and one another. And yet for some particular mystery, since the time of creation, or at least where it is said in the Hebrew Bible in the Old Testament, the killing of Able by his brother Cain, the history of humankind has basically been a history of fratricidal wars, its been a history of humankind's atrocity to one another and I think in that case I can safely say, of mankind because the acts of killing throughout history have essentially been the characteristics of men and not of women. And yet, as time goes by we have the impression that because we have cellphones and TVs and airplanes and we go to outer space, that there is much that has changed in human nature. Well let me tell you that having spent two years in the midst of the war in the former Yugoslavia and seen these atrocities, then two years in Afghanistan and six years in Iraq as well as in other in context, man's inhumanity to other man has not changed much. And it is quite surprising, it is quite surprising that if you just scratch the surface of civilization, you find the atavism of human being of the earlier times. And you wonder, whatever happened in the history of evolution, no matter how you wish to count it, whether it's six million years in the evolution of homo sapiens, or even 7,000 years in the more modern history of civilization where we see 40 different civilizations flourish and produce extraordinary results, as well see I the Egyptian, Chinese, Samarian, Acadian, Mesopotamian, and many other civilizations. What did we add to the human quality in all of these years and I dare say, looking at what I have seen, and what I still see in the field, few little. And yet at the same time, I have to tell you, that I have also seen extraordinary acts of courage, extraordinary acts of generosity, extraordinary acts of selflessness and so it is sort of a puzzle to look on the one hand the best that humankind can offer and at the same time at the worst that humankind can offer. And it brings to mind the constant struggle that we have to be vigilant about in order to make sure that the best in us comes out. And in this respect, allow me to point to two extraordinary verses in the Qur'an, not very frequently remembered. In one of those verses it is

said, ‘and we have created you man and women, people and tribe, so that you may get to know one another, verily the best among you is the most pious’ in the sense, the person that does the most good. So think about the terms, we have created you man and woman, people and tribe, different colors, different genders, different ethnicities, so that you may know one another, meaning so that you may learn how to coexist. The Qur’an does not refer to Muslims when it says that, it doesn’t say we have created you men and women Muslims or Muslim men and women, it addresses the whole of human kind. And it shows that what is different between people is not the status they attain, the color of their skin, the power of their might, the wealth that they accumulate, but what is different and what makes the difference is the good that the people can do. And the other verse which is also an extraordinary verse ‘and we have dignified it, the descendants of Adam, [ARABIC- karumna]’ The word karumna is Arabic combines two words in English, it combines the word dignified and it combines the word honored. And so here it is, God is saying, and we have dignified slash honored the descendants of Adam. Think of how extraordinary this is. No very different from the message of Judaism and Christianity, as well as other parts in the Qur’an, in which God has created humankind and infused the human creation with the human spirit. In fact, in other verse in the Qur’an God has infused humankind with some of the characteristics of God itself, namely, the 99 adjectives ARABIC, in which Allah is referred to in the Qur’an, though if I may as a little parenthesis – Allah is referred to in the Qur’an by more than ninety-nine attributes, but that is what the Hadiths of the Prophet refers to. That some of these are human qualities, compassion, mercy, love, justice, fairness, all of these are human qualities, human attributes, human qualities. But they are also qualities, attributes, adjectives, that God has seen fit to infuse into each and everyone of us. And every time I see a situation where somebody has been killed or a woman has been raped or someone has been tortured and I look at that person and I said “whatever happened to the words ARABIC” Has the person who has committed these atrocities ever stopped and think, that by doing what that person did to another human being is as if that person defiled God. Because after all, if we as human beings are the recipient of the spirit of God, that by defiling us as human beings, we defile our creator as well. And yet for some particular reason, this message is not particularly heard.

As I mentioned, I started telling you that I was telling you a story and the story was a little strange to me because I was doing a mass grave exhumation in the former Yugoslavia, now mind you, well I was not really trained and think nobody is really trained to do a mass grave exhumation, you may know the techniques but imagine if you will a piece of dirt, you do something like archeological excavation, you remove the dirt very slowly because you don’t want to disturb the bodies underneath

it. And as you do that, gradually some things appear in the ground. A finger, a hand comes out of the ground, you clean up a little more, a skull a body, remnants of clothes. Sometimes they are totally decomposed and you see the bones, sometimes they are still in their flesh. And these bodies come out in front of you. It is like each body that is looking at you, asks you the question 'why am I here? What happened? How did you, how did the world, how did everybody allow this to happen? How did the rest of the world look indifferent and look the other way while this was happening to me?' And you have to wrestle with your conscience in answering that question. And in one of these excavations we had discovered nineteen bodies and it was difficult for us to identify the bodies because we did not have enough post-mortem and pre-mortem data to compare DNA or verify who they were, but we knew that these people were Serbs. But they were in a Croatian area so presumably the Croats, who were Catholic, had killed the Serbs, who were Orthodox during a war in which the majority of victims were Bosnian Muslims. As far as I'm concerned, it didn't really make a bit of a difference which crimes I was investigating. To me, a crime was a crime, irrespective of whether the victim was a Serb or a Croat or a Muslim. But anyways, so they came up and I didn't really know what to do because I was about 300 kilometers away from the closest city, it was winter, it was very cold, I had been in the field with my men for three weeks. We slept in tents, we had portable heaters but it was still very cold. We didn't have hot water and its very difficult to work in mass grave exhumation in the middle of the muck that comes out of the ground without hot water to wash. No toilets. A lot of little difficulties in life, which of course pale by comparison with the horrors that you see. But you, if you have to ensure this for more than two, three days, you know you sort of feel it after a while. So I decided, I had a unit with me that happened to be from the nearest battalion, UN battalion, that was there and it happened to be a Jordanian unit. And so I went to see the Jordanian comandante, it was cornel and I said can I borrow a few men from you to dig some graves. And he said sure. So we found a little place and I put a cordon around it and we dug nineteen graves for the nineteen bodies we found. And I had the Jordanian, Arab, Muslim soldiers pick up some wood and we did the Orthodox cross which you has two parts to it and then I sent a unit of the Jordanian battalion to the nearest town to see if we could find an Orthodox priest, which we did, and we had a little ceremony and he made a little prayer and you know I had the troops with me stand at attention and that was it. And you know, I went to my next assignment or whatever it is, and about a month later I got a request that the Minister of Justice of Serbia wanted to come and see me. The Serbs usually would come and see me in my office in Geneva to complain that I was too pro-Bosnian or something like that. And so he came and he said you know, I heard a story. And he repeated the story and I said yes this happened and he said can you describe to me the nineteen people. And I described them and at a

certain point I was describing one of the bodies that we had picked up because it struck me very particularly, it was a woman who had a huge sort of summer hat, who was holding her shoes in her hands and who apparently must have been killed elsewhere because she was wrapped in a blanket and she was dumped in the mass grave on top of the other bodies and so when we lifted her, we lifted her with this long dress, long hat, and the shoes in her hands, she was clasping the shoes and it sort of struck me phone. And again don't ask me why, I don't know the reason but I sort of insisted that we wrap her up in her blanket, still holding her shoes in her hands and that's the way we buried her. And the man started crying and I said well, you know, I assumed he was crying because he was moved by the situation and he said, you know this was my companion. This was the woman I lived with. Um and I had to leave and she stayed back because her mother was too old to leave and she obviously was killed and this brings closure to me because I know she is dead and I know she is buried. Um and for some particular reason, he was absolutely flabbergasted that a Muslim would want to bury a Christian Serb Orthodox, particularly the very same people who were doing most of the victimization of the Bosnian Muslims and treat that victim with the same dignity. And I tried to explain to him, as I am sharing with you from the heart, the feeling that hopefully we would reach a certain level, I want to say of humanism, that it doesn't make a difference. That we recognize in each and every other human being, not only a little bit of God but also a little bit of ourselves in that person. And I think if we started thinking that way, we wouldn't have the continued the atrocities that we have had over the years.

There is no doubt as I look at these and many, many other events, that invariable, these things happen when you objectivize the other. When the person that you torture, that you rape, that you destroy, is the other. When you dehumanize or subhumanize the other. How else could you have had slavery, if you didn't look down at the other as being inferior, as to make him a slave. How else could you have the Holocaust for an example and many others, if you didn't dehumanize and subhumanize the other human being. And yet for some particular reason, we never seem to learn the lesson. In every conflict, including now, and the question to me was, what do you see in what happened in Reza? But frankly what happened in Reza, in December of last year and January, reflected that. The young Israeli military men who went in and killed over 300 children under the age of 15, simply looked at these people as either inhuman or subhuman. They went in there, killed, destroyed civilian population, thirteen hundred people were killed in span of twenty days. Of whom, six hundred of them were women and children. Six thousand people were injured. Twenty thousand structures were destroyed. How can you do that without having a feeling of dehumanization or subhumanization of

the other? You see a little bit of that in almost every conflict. One however sees that in conflicts involving the military there might be more restraint, more discipline, more control by the command structure and hopefully less harmful conduct done to noncombatants. But the history of conflicts in the world is not made of these wars in which you have armies facing one another. After ten years of working in the field, and that's ten years ago, so I'm speaking of span of twenty years I discovered to my great surprise as it will be to you, that there was no place to go, that you could ask how many conflicts have taken place in the world, or how many victims occurred and I didn't understand until much later that this was really do to political reasons. The Security Council does not want to have a record of the number of wars and conflicts and victims and deaths. Because it wants to be able every time something happens to say oh my God, I didn't know that was possible. It was the same thing in Rwanda when basically the United States made it understood that President Clinton didn't want to hear about an impending genocide in Rwanda and yet in less an one hundred days an estimated 800,000 people were killed. And there was ample warning, but you see it makes for good plausible deniability to say oh I don't know, I didn't know, I could not imagine that this would happen. So about two and a half years ago I embarked on a world wide study with about 43 experts in all the regions of the world and decided to tally all of the world conflicts in the world and we concluded our work with two volumes of about two thousand pages and hopefully government leaders will not be able to ignore it. In which to our absolute astonishment we discovered that since World War Two, since World War Two there were three hundred and thirteen conflicts in the world. And how many, how many victims did they produce? Ninety-two million people killed. So, since we said Never Again after World War Two, ninety-two million people were killed. And you ask yourself, well how is that possible? Well its possible because it's the sort of, what they call the Chinese technique, the drop by drop. There is a conflict of a hundred thousand here, and two hundred thousand there and you know, unless you get close to the million, then the major powers are not going to pay too much close attention and preferably it would have to be somewhere where there are diamonds or petrol or minerals because it there are not strategic economic interests who cares about human beings. Ninety-two million people killed, So I asked the statistician in our team and I said, over a period of 60 years, 313 conflicts, 92 million people killed, how many people does it take to kill that many people. And after he made some studies and projections, he said no less than a million people. And I said, now let me ask the next question, we have 90 million people killed out of a pool of perpetrators of about a million people. How many of these people were prosecuted? I was absolutely astonished. Total number of people prosecuted: 866. And I said to myself well how can we expect any type of deterrence or prevention if only 866 people are prosecuted out of a potential pool of a million. How

did this happen? And I then discovered that in 126 of these conflicts, the governments gave complete amnesty to the perpetrators of these crimes. So almost half of these conflicts, complete amnesty. Wiped out. I said well lets look at victims, after all this is what we are interested in victims, people, what happened to them. How many governments or systems established a victim compensation? Other than the post-World War Two victim compensation for Jewish and Eastern European victims of World War Two, there isn't a single country that has provided victim compensation for the victims of these crimes that have occurred in their countries. And I asked myself well how much did it cost the world to stop these conflicts after they began? And again, astounding number, the United Nations alone spent over one hundred billion dollars in peacekeeping operations since World War Two. And I thought to myself, one hundred billion dollars, I'm not an economist but common sense tells me that if you would have invested one hundred billion dollars in these failed states in economic department couldn't you have at least saved half of these victims? Common sense tells me yes. So I went to a water engineer and I said you know the big problem in Darfur started because there was no water. I said, how much would it have cost to do a pipeline from the Nile to Darfur? And after a little bit of study he said, you know I am going to give you a wide range of figure because the typography varies enormously but they minimum range is \$300 million and the upper range is \$500 million. And I said okay, lets take \$500 million dollars would have saved 250,000 people and two million people from being displaced. And I then went and said well how much did the UN spend on peacekeeping operations since then. \$2.7 billion. So, I said we could have spent \$500 million and saved all of this and saved some money at the other end instead of having gone in after, but it doesn't happen. It doesn't happen. For some particular reason, that that would be common sense to all of us simply doesn't filter to the major governments, to the United Nations, to major organizations in eth world. Now having said that, I have to tell you also that in every one of those theaters of conflicts what you saw in terms of human kindness, if I can use that term, is also extraordinary. The humanitarian relief organizations, the various religious organizations that are there to provide medical and food assistance and supplies, the NGOs and the volunteers that go there at the risk of their lives to help others. It is absolutely extraordinary to see this amount of volunteer work and how much good it does. And it really restores one's faith in human nature. It doesn't restore one's faith in governments. It doesn't restore one's faith in international organizations and we have to ask ourselves the question, well why cant we transform these positive energies into the policies of governments and international organizations and place victims at the beginning. It's a very strange feeling to be in the midst of a post conflict situations and wars and wonder what could have been done to prevent them. And I'll give you a simple example. During the presidential campaign I sat with a number of advisors to

President Obama and I said, you know, in the Middle East the whole of the Middle East and for that matter regions with the whole Muslim world really depend upon a settlement between the Palestinians and the Israelis and I said what are you doing about it. And they talked about the plans and I said, you know, what you are aiming at is to have a peace agreement and everybody said yes. And I said, that peace agreement is worth the piece of paper it is written on and I said it's not worth anymore than the paper it is written on. You cannot have peace without having reconciliation and in order to have reconciliation, the harm or the wrong done to the Palestinian people has to be acknowledged first. It has to start with the mutual understanding of the other side's narrative. And one narrative doesn't cancel the other. The fact that we may all empathize with Jews for their historic plight in connection with the Holocaust and fully share with them their expectation that it should not happen to them again, doesn't mean this is a justification to victimize the Palestinians. And I think part of the idea of reconciliation, which we have learned from long time ago, you know victims don't want money to compensation them. Victims don't want the type of rewards that most people think they do. Victims above all want the recognition that they have been victimized and for somebody to say I'm sorry. And I think in the Palestinian Israeli conflict we are precisely at this juncture. Not only on the Israeli side nobody wants to say I'm sorry but also on the Israeli side there is even the expectation that the Palestinians should say, no I am sorry for the inconvenience that we have caused you in having to use force against us. It is almost an absurd type of a logic, but it is an absurd logic because to a large extent we are unable to be evenhanded. We are unable to put aside exceptionalism. We are unable to put aside discrepancies. Now let me give you an example, were back in January of 09, I'm in Cairo at the League of Arab States, I'm chairing a conference on the topic that I mentioned to you before, on trying to find out what happened in conflicts in the world, seventeen Arab governments are represented. Ministers of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Chief Justices, a lot of people. Everyday, every delegation for six hours a day, was pounding the table about the atrocities the Israelis were doing in Gaza. After two days, I took to the podium as I am now, in front of 159 delegates sitting in the official room and I said, you know, we're here to talk about what happened in the Arab world over the past fifty years. I couldn't agree more with you about the terrible things happening to the Palestinians, but you know, let me remind you when in the Nasser days, the Egyptian army went in Yemen, 50,000 Yemenis were killed, gas weapons were used. You know, I think I should like to remind you, even though the Minister of Justice of Syria is sitting here, that when Hafez al-Assad went into Homs and Hama he killed 50,000 Muslims. You know, Black September in Jordan, King Hussein killed an estimated 12,000 Palestinians, in the civil war in Lebanon a 170,000 people were killed, in Darfur 250,000 people were killed. I said, why is it that

nobody is speaking of those. Believe me, I did not get any applause for that. And I concluded on something that got me even less applause and I said you know something, while we are talking about it, we should not also forget the Israeli civilians that have been killed by the Palestinian resistance. Because what applies to one applies to the other. And there was total silence and I said what I would like to see one day, is the level of maturity of Arabs and Muslims to be able to rise to the level of recognition that if we are going to recognize the value of a human being then it shouldn't make a difference what the gender, what the color of the skin, what the ethnicity, what the religion is. Anyway, I see Aziza standing here as a reminder that I should conclude and I would like to conclude with three sayings, which I think are very telling. The first is a Hadith of the Prophet ARABIC, if any of you sees a wrong, you must right it, you must right it with your hand if you can; meaning with your action and if you can't, there are two different variations of the Hadith, one says with your tongue, meaning that you have to speak out against it, and the other variation is with your eyes, at least you show your reproach and otherwise, at least in your heart and that is the weakest of all faith ARABIC. And so, I ask the question, why should we have the weakest of all faiths if we can do something about redressing a wrong. Pope Paul the VI once said, about peace and he said if you want peace, work for justice. And lastly, there is an extraordinary statement in the Talmud, it says the world rests on three pillars: it rests on truth, it rests on justice and peace. And then the commentary follows but in reality, the three are one, because you cannot have justice without having truth and if you have truth and justice then you have peace.